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"La California" in Italy



The sign of the town La California

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By TONY GHEZZO

MARCH 22, 2013

The main purpose of this article is to make the people of California, USA aware of the existence of another California, in Tuscany, Italy. "Why" and "when" the new California in Italy was founded and "who" named it La California, it's a very interesting story. There are two main versions of the story that is about to be unfolded in details. Both versions have been introduced by Marco Andrenacci, an Italian history major so interested in the past, present and future of "La California" that he made it his business to research its origins and its history since he himself has lived most of his life in that town.

Marco Andrenacci was born in Livorno, December 31, 1972, lived in Pisa with his family and in 1997 he received a PhD in Telecommunications at the University of Pisa. Several years ago he moved to La California where he happily lives with Laura, his loyal companion. Together Marco and Laura enjoy the tranquility of the small town, the beauty and the serenity of the sea in a totally relaxed atmosphere.

Marco is presently writing a book, while finding pleasure in a full time job in telecommunication in the nearby city of Pisa. LA CALIFORNIA is a town of circa 1,500 inhabitants, part of the "comune" of Bibbona. Bibbona, population 3,200 near Livorno (Leghorn), is today one of the most sought-after destinations by tourists eager to learn more about the interesting and enigmatic Etruscan civilization.

La California is located 3 miles south of Cecina, which is a delightful town of 28,000, a very short distance from the Etruscan Coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea. While La California's origin is rather recent (approximately 150 years), the origin of the area that includes Cecina and Bibbona, is prehistoric and goes all the way back to the stone age and Paleolithic time. Before the founding of this California town, the Bibbona area was under the direct control of the Medici family when the Castle of Bibbona was donated to Eleanor of Toledo, wife of Cosimo de' Medici. But in 1737, after the Medici family died out, the whole area was taken over by the Lorraine dynasty and became part of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

Thanks to Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Habsburg-Lorraine (1747-1782), several square miles of coast called Maremma (a swamp land infested by malaria) were successfully reclaimed, made fertile and productive. The marsh land had been in a terrible condition of

neglect for several centuries, practically since the fall of the Roman Empire (476 A.C.), because the local people, unable to cope with the problem, abandoned the area.

The success in reclaiming the swamp land was extraordinarily achieved by Peter Leopold and resumed a few years later by the Fascist party under the program "Bonifica delle Paludi Pontine". To the Grand Duchy of Tuscany goes also credit for building new roads along Via Emilia (the road's name was subsequently changed to Via Aurelia) in addition to new railroads, especially the "Livorno-Grosseto" and the "Pisa-Livorno-Cecina". The name "California" was given in 1865 to an area that embraced a small group of farm houses near Bibbona; the area included also a few private residences and the "Hotel Ristorante Gabbani" (see photo).

The best known families of this town were the Amerigo Gabbani's and the Attilio Fabbri's. In 1865 the name "La California" became definitely official when it was used on certificates and other documents issued by the city hall. From post-cards of the town printed in 1940, it is obvious that, even at that time, the place was known to everybody as "La California". For a brief period a few local people referred to such a place as Braccio di Bibbona, (Suburb of Bibbona) but afterward the town was officially called La California.

The first managers of the Hotel Restaurant Gabbani were Federico and Amerigo Gabbani. After the Gabbanis, the hotel was owned by the families Demi, Favilli, Pesce and finally by Maurillo Genovese, the present owner. Nobody knows with certainty why the town was named La California and specifically who named it. It seems most logical though, that Amerigo Gabbani and/or his father Federico be given credit for choosing the name. As a matter of fact Federico baptized his son "Amerigo" because of his great admiration and love for America. Furthermore it is rather logical that Federico would use the name of one of America's most popular states, California, to immortalize his own town, the town where he was born.

Consideration should be also given to the fact that several Gabbanis emigrated to California, USA during the "gold-rush", as did Gabbani Rinaldo, born in 1888, Gabbani Emilio, born in 1877, Gabbani Maria, born in 1892 and others. A different answer to the question why the town was named California is offered by Leonetto Cipriani, a very interesting man that lived in San Francisco for several years, traveled extensively throughout America and was very fond of the USA.

Cipriani was born in 1812 in the city of Centuri, Corsica and in 1830 served in the French Army with the rank of captain. Transferred to Algiers he met a very attractive girl native of Genoa. A few years later the couple moved to Tuscany, Italy where for a while they seemed well adjusted but suddenly she ended her life leaving Leonetto totally crushed and depressed. Between 1831 and 1834 he traveled to the Antilles, to Central America and to South America. He was one of the first men to cross the continent of North America. His father had been close friend of Simon Bolivar, the hero of South America's independence.

Cipriani did well and returned to Italy with 6 million gold francs (the equivalent of today's 18 million euros or 27 million dollars). Being born a French subject he spoke the language very fluently, but having lived several years between Pisa and Leghorn where his family owned land and villas he was always very proud to identify himself as Italian. Back in Italy Cipriani received the title of count by Camillo Benso di Cavour and was made a colonel of the Italian Army.

In 1848, when Italy began its fight for independence, he fought against the Austrians that were defeated at Goito (Mantua). This was a very important victory of the First Italian War of Independence. He became also a good friend of Garibaldi, the great Italian hero, even though he didn't share his republican views.

He also became liaison officer between Napoleon III and Victor Emmanuel I. Then he returned to Livorno with the title of Special Commissary. In the meantime Leonetto's father purchased several properties around Cecina, among which the beautiful Villa di San Vincenzino, where he enjoyed relaxing between trips. In 1849 he traveled to France to renew his friendship with Bonaparte III, nephew of Napoleon. Restless, he went back to Italy to fight against the Austrians.

In Italy he accepted the title of Consul of Sardinia in San Francisco, where he became very popular, bought land, cattle and became a prominent rancher after traveling much throughout the States. In 1858 in New York, he married an attractive young lady, Mary Worthington and had a child that he named Leonetto Jr. In the United States as well he made powerful friends. In 1874, at the beginning of the Civil War, he proposed to president Lincoln a plan to kidnap confederate general Pierre Beauregard (also an Italian born, from Parma).

Suddenly his wife Mary died and he went back to Italy in 1865 where he was nominated Senator for life for the Kingdom of Italy and subsequently honorary general. After traveling so extensively for many years, crossing the Atlantic Ocean at least a dozen times, Cipriani finally decided to settle in Centuri, the city in the island of Corsica where he was born. In Corsica he married Maria Napoleoni and had three children.

He died May 10, 1888, at age 76, comforted by his family and by the memory of the vast American prairies. It's very evident that Leonetto Cipriani was part of Cecina's history just as much as Amerigo Gabbani. Cipriani too owned and managed a hotel restaurant in the main street of Cecina. It's very comprehensible that Leonetto Cipriani's love for San Francisco and California prompted him to name the town in the vicinity of Cecina "La California".



La California, frazione di Bibbona



Train to La California (LI) - 28.06.11 by Marco Carrara

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